PARADOXICAL HYPERBOLE: IMAGINING RAPA NUI'S REMOTENESS AND MYSTERY

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All places are to some extent imaginary, built up in the public mind from images selected and transmitted by an articulate few. Regarding Rapa Nui, imaginations have worked overtime. Scores of popular articles, books, and films represent Rapa Nui as remote and mysterious. One might well construct a few archetypal sentences to get the point across: "Mysterious stone heads gaze across the barren plains of the remotest island in the world;" or, "On this most isolated inhabited island in the Pacific, the remote expressions of the stone-carved statues guard their mysteries." And many other variations of such twaddly purple prose.

These are old themes, their provenance going back to the stories confabulated by European visitors and residents from the late eighteenth century to the 1930s. The remotely mysterious was enshrined, at the time of the First World War, in popular books by Routledge (1919) and Bienvenido de Estella (1920). By the early twentieth century the double theme of remoteness and mystery was catching hold of the world's English-reading public, to be brought into far greater prominence from the 1950s by the late Thor Heyerdahl and a multitude of television documentaries. So common is the "remote and mysterious" trope, academics sometimes fall into the trap. Bahn and Flenley's *Easter Island/ Earth Island* (1992) contains an example, and their second edition is even entitled *The Enigmas of Easter Island* (2002). In my book *The Modernization of Easter Island* (1981) I questioned the mystery but accepted the remoteness. Now I wish to question whether indeed Rapa Nui ever was, or continues to be, either remote or mysterious. I also wish to show that both tropes are not only hyperbolic but also paradoxical: mysteries are solved and remoteness is annihilated, but both continue to live on in books, articles and films as if nothing had happened. Remoteness, furthermore, is an intrinsically paradoxical notion.

MYSTERIOUS RAPA NUI

For at least a century, the literature on Rapa Nui has been dominated by popular works, the titles of which emphasize the island's "mystery," "secrets," or "enigmas." Most authors are content with "mystery," but Heyerdahl and Castex like "secrets," while Dos Passos and the Bahn/Flenley team prefer "enigmas." A few eccentrics have chosen "riddle," "dreams," or the adjective "fantastic" (for references, see Porteous 1981: 254). Perhaps Rapa Nui is, in Churchill's famous words, a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Whatever the case, mystery and its ilk are tired old tropes just begging for early retirement.

What are the mysteries? First, who were the initial inmigrants and where did they come from? (Heyerdahl provided a lot of fun here, keeping the academics on their toes). Next, when did they arrive, and were there several waves of incomers? Once on the island, how did they live terms of agricultural and ocean resources? What were their politics, and their social and religious organization? Can we decipher the *rongorongo*? Why and how did they fashion the *moai* and other, lesser, artifacts? How were the *moai* moved? (several plausible answers here, after some archaeological shouting-matches; does it matter very much?). What were the wars about, and why so much destruction, particularly the toppling of the moai? And finally, how did the Rapanui deal with the explorers and other even less benign visitors who bedevilled the island in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? These are the traditional mysteries, and perusal of a few useful books, some sheaves of academic papers, and a couple of good documentaries will now provide the curious with most of the answers. In Heyerdahl's words, *Easter Island: the Mystery Solved* (1989). And it's quite a treat to find a modern coffee-table book with a sober title, such as Van Tilburg's (1994) *Easter Island: Archaeology, Ecology, and Culture*. Other, more recently-emerging, mysteries have also been solved in general terms. In the 1970s I felt that "the real "mystery" of Easter Island is its historical development" (1981:vi). A broad picture of the island's history, geography, anthropology, and modernization and development processes became available in the 1980s in a series of articles and books by Porteous (from an outsider viewpoint) and McCall (from the complementary insider viewpoint). A number of researchers are currently working on tourism and alternative futures for Rapa Nui. In the same period Flenley and his collaborators cleared up the general problems of palaeobotany, deforestation, and subsequent cultural collapse, giving rise to the notion that Rapa Nui's brush with doom prefigures global ecocatastrophe. It's clear that the "enigmas" that figure in the title of Flenley and Bahn's latest book are really only details (McLaughlin 2003), although we might like the opinion of an historical psychiatrist on what the early Rapanui felt about the felling of the last few trees.

So the mystery has gone. This is not surprising; it's the role of science to unravel so-called mysteries. A final mystery does remain, however, and one with major repercussions for Rapa Nui. Exactly who has the power to make vital decisions about land-use and development? This mystery becomes ever more important as shadowy groups put forward proposals for port installations, gigantic naval lighthouses, airport control towers in the likeness of a *moai,* and, perhaps most devastating of all for island landscape and national park integrity, the resort and golf course proposal for the center of the island at Vaitea. If any of these proposals come to pass, mysteries will remain about who was responsible and who benefited financially. But the details of land development remain a secret in Canada too.

Remote Rapa Nui

Remoteness is a difficult and paradoxical term. First, it involves far distance, but only in a relative sense. Remote places have to be remote from somewhere else, usually a place generally regarded as bigger or more important. Thus Rapa Nui is remote from Paris. Yet remoteness is a two-way street. Parisian: "Rapa Nui is exotic, but so far away;" Rapanui: "Paris is exotic, but so far away." The paradox resolves a little on realising that the *quality* of remoteness is important, and depends on whether you are an insider or an outsider.

My studies of isolated mining towns in British Columbia (Porteous et al. 1975) suggest that remoteness, as perceived by the residents of a remote place, generally involves a sense of deprivation. Small towns with good services two days' drive from Vancouver were not felt to be as remote as similar towns, with poor services, only one day's drive from that city. The worst-case scenario is a very isolated settlement with poor services, which probably describes Rapa Nui at certain periods of its history. On the other hand, some residents of remote places learn to cope with the isolation because, paradoxically, they value the insularity.

At this point we realize that the concept of remoteness is complex and depends on one's standpoint. For some Rapanui, their island may be the navel of the world and all its artefacts and history readily explicable. And how can the *navel* of the world be *remote*? Local people, however, have had very little input into the media representation of their island. Thus the remainder of this argument deals solely with the outsider's viewpoint.

The notion of Rapa Nui's remoteness is a colonial concept, based on the standpoints of Europeans or European-derived peoples in the Americas. Newly-discovered islands on the other side of the world are indeed remote, a notion only emphasized when Rapa Nui's eccentric location on an accurate globe became a commonplace. In global terms, the northern hemisphere, and particularly Europe, remains as yet the center of the world. Books written by English-speakers rarely consider the worldviews of Rwandans or even Chinese (too remote!).

When was Rapa Nui remote? During the great Polynesian migrations it is hard to believe that the island was extremely remote, for it was part of an enormous pattern of voyages that took the original Malayo-Polynesians westward as far as Africa and eastward as far as South America. It became much more remote, however, once voyaging declined and after deforestation ensured that no more seagoing vessels could be produced locally. This is probably the peak of Rapa Nui's remoteness. Early European voyagers remarked on the island less for its isolation than for its lack of provisioning, and the island remained in this state until the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1860s to the First World War, however, the island became part of a Pacific-wide web of commerce, with frequent, and sometimes unacceptable visits from sailing ships. At this time Rapa Nui occupied a recognized position on the Chile-Tahiti-Australia run. Only with the opening of the Panama Canal did the island slip back into relative isolation until the publicity of Heyerdahl and the arrival of air service in 1967. Historically, then, Rapa Nui has been at times both remote and fairly well-connected, depending on the actions and perceptions of outside interests.

Geographically, it is difficult to accept common descriptions such as "the most remote island in the world," or "in the Pacific." Nor is it much better to describe the island as the "remotest inhabited island" in any geographical area. Someone might well produce for us a map depicting this scenario. Is Rapa Nui much more remote from a major city as the crow flies, for example, than the British territory of Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic?

But it is in terms of *accessibility* that remoteness really matters. Some islands are absolutely remote. Neither the general public nor the short-changed former inhabitants are allowed to visit the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia, currently leased by the U.S. as a "swept-clean" military base (Porteous and Smith 2001). Most other islands are only relatively remote, but the global villaging of cheap airfares and the internet ensure that such remoteness is as nothing in comparison to 30 years ago. Economic geography shows us that Rapa Nui's alleged remoteness totally fails to convince. Anyone with access to a major airport on any continent (including Antarctica) can reach Hangaroa on scheduled flights in two days or less. This is hardly true of the myriad out-islands of many Pacific archipelagos, where access is only by ship. Compared with Tristan da Cunha and Pitcairn (as yet), Rapa Nui is immensely accessible. This remains true even when comparative costs are taken into account. Rapa Nui does remain a high-cost destination, but we can hardly call remote an island from which, with a single connection in Santiago or Pape'ete, one can fly either way around the world to Paris. Thus all descriptions of Rapa Nui's remoteness, however true for some periods of the past, are now merely redundant rhetoric.

Conclusion

In times past, Rapa Nui has indeed been mysterious and remote. But this was not true at all times. To take just one obvious example, Rapa Nui was home to the early Rapanui; it is one of the central qualities of home that it be as unmysterious as possible (Porteous and Smith 2001). Further, the notions of mystery and remoteness have been tainted with hyperbole in sensational films, articles, and book titles. Clearly, these descriptors are chiefly European tropes, paradoxically bearing within themselves, through the power of science and technology, the seeds of their own dissolution. Remoteness is paradoxical because of its two-way point of view. It has persisted past its sell-by date because EuroAmericans have the power, write the books, and make the films, and because the words "mystery" and "remoteness" are good sellers.

It's high time these redundant and all too hyperbolic tropes were consigned to the trashcan of history.

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RAPA NUI: A HYPERBOLIC ICONOGRAPHY

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Places are readily represented, understood, and marketed through the use of capsule images (Porteous 1977) or icons. The Eiffel Tower means Paris; the shell-like image of the Opera House means Sydney. Such large vertical objects, hyperbolic in their exaggerated obviousness, make useful icons. In this paper I explore the iconography of Rapa Nui, which is rather more complicated than the image which immediately springs to mind, the icon of the stern and severe moai which decorates so many book-covers, film titles, tee-shirts and placemats.

ICONOGRAPHY

Iconography concerns the visual images or symbols that are used to represent a person, place or thing. An icon is an object regarded as representative of something. An icon may be a person (Darwin), an idea (evolution), a nonhuman creature (Galapagos finches) or a place (the Galapagos Islands); together these interreferential icons make up a complex iconic system. On first consideration, such an iconic system for Rapa Nui might well include ideas such as mystery and remoteness, objects such as the moai, and persons such as Thor Heyerdahl. A moai would seem to be the perfect Rapa Nui icon, because: it is a large vertical object with human features which projects an aura of power; it combines the object with the general ideas of remoteness (spatially, temporally, and in demeanor) and mystery (all the problems of who built the moai, how they were transported, and where the builders originated); and because it is associated with romantic adventure in the person of Thor Heyerdahl, who began serious excavation and promoted Rapa Nui to the waiting world. The moai are hyperbolic in their very nature, being both larger than life and sterner than life. They seem like Freudian superegos, projecting their powerful gaze across the supine island.

LONGITUDENAL SURVEY

In order to investigate the above speculations, I performed a longitudinal survey of public perceptions of Rapa Nui. In 1978 I asked a geography class at the University of Victoria, British Columbia: "What three items spring to mind when you think of Easter Island? Please answer within two minutes." Twenty-five years later, in September 2003, I repeated the exercise. In both cases almost all respondents were Caucasian, in their early twenties, split about equally in gender, and in the last two years of a major in geography or a cognate discipline. In 1978 there were 44 respondents, providing a maximum of 132 possible responses, whereas in 2003 there were 47 respondents giving a maximum of 141 possible responses. The chief problem in content analyzing such material is to determine coherent and meaningful categories. After much consideration, I decided upon the categories laid out in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey responses (%)

Category	**1978**	**2003**
Know nothing at all	33	21
Know the location	11	6
Archaeological Complex	36	24
Environmental Complex	0	19
"Tropical paradise	7	1
Totals	87%	71%

Those who knew nothing said so, left blanks, or provided cute statements on Easter bunny themes. Knowing the location includes mention of the South Pacific, Polynesia (rare), or Chile. The ignorance of a minority of guessers is seen in the "tropical paradise" theme, which in 1978 imagined Easter Island with luxuriant vegetation, a hot climate, and wonderful beaches. That this theme had almost disappeared by 2003 reflects the change in importance of the archaeological and environmental themes over the 25-year period.

The traditional Archaeological Complex of themes includes mention of the moai, other artefacts, mystery and remoteness, archaeological research, Heyerdahl, Mulloy, and aku-aku. Accounting for 24% of all responses in 1978 and 18% in 2003, the moai dominated the complex. In contrast, the Environmental Complex, non-existent in 1978, contains references to environmental degradation, resource overexploi-